

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

By Garry J. Moes

In the long course of human events, too much and too little has been accorded to discipline as a tool for invoking human rectification. For some, discipline is salvation itself -- or at least the central necessity of human progress. "No evil propensity of the human heart is so powerful," Seneca held, "that it may not be subdued by discipline." Similarly, according to Immanuel Kant, "Man must be disciplined, for he is by nature raw and wild." The humanist cleric Henry Ward Beecher, suggesting the progressive necessity, asserted that there is not a man alive "who does not need to be drilled, disciplined, and developed into something higher and nobler and better than he is by nature." For others, discipline, to the contrary, is the ultimate prop for men too passionless to realize the creative fullness of human freedom. Montaigne, for example, argued, "There is no course of life as weak and sottish as that which is managed by order, method and discipline."

For the humanist seeking protection for human potential from the obvious destructiveness of anarchy, order and discipline are moral requisites of freedom. History has shown us, alas, that under a humanistic order, this very requisite has just as easily led to totalitarianism.

To these extremes, Christianity answers with a discipline that neither controls nor stifles, but cleanses and instructs -- a discipline that does not bind or compel the conscience with human invention, but rather "nourishes and preserves concord and unity." It is an organizing principle for a life previously rescued by grace from chaos. (I Timothy 4:7). To the humanistic mind, including that which pervades much of the Christian church of our day, it is folly to suggest that sanction and discipline could have such effect. But the Christian Scriptures present just such a bright prospect.

If earlier non-Christian disciplinarians found restriction to be man's best hope for order, today's philosophers, social planners and religious antinomians don't know the word. "The word discipline has disappeared from our minds, our mouths, our pulpits, and our culture," notes author, theologian and counselor Jay E. Adams. "We hardly know what discipline means in modern ... society. And yet, there is no other way to attain godliness; discipline is the path to godliness." (Adams, *Godliness Through Discipline*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972, pp. 2-3). The loss of this perspective has left us with a crippled and crippling view of discipline, namely that it is an unwelcomed infringement upon personal prerogatives, pleasures and privacies. In short, a violation of rights.

THE MEANING, PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE

In Biblical Christianity, as in few other systems, the rigors of disciplinary correction and punishment have no other end save "repentance and reformation of life," as Noah Webster put it. Nowhere else can one find such a restorative view. It is, indeed, this Christian presupposition which has given the West its understanding of arts, letters, sciences, morals, manners and instruction in wisdom as "disciplines." In this understanding, discipline is aimed both at truth (doctrine) and life (behavior). In the Bible, discipline is presented both as *instruction* and *chastisement*-- with the clear emphasis being on the former, including that aspect of instruction which we know as *training*. Even in the case of the latter, it embodies reformation and rectification. It is instruction and government, "comprehending the communication of knowledge and the regulation of practice" (Noah Webster). It was, no doubt, what the signers of Guido de Bres' Belgic Confession of Faith had in their minds when they said: "We believe that [the] true Church must be *governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word*: namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church; *that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means...*" (emphasis added).

We see in such confessions, as indeed in Scripture itself, that Christian discipline closely links the Word of God and life; more precisely, it is designed, through instruction and sanction, to bring the Word of God forcefully to bear upon behavior. For this reason, the Church, at least in some quarters, historically has put the words "*admonition and discipline*" in close conjunction and has targeted this combination at a second compound, namely "*doctrine and life*."

One denomination's articles of church order ably set forth these constructions along with a threefold statement of objective: "The purpose of the *admonition and*

discipline of the church is to maintain the *honor of God*, to *restore the sinner*, and to *remove offense* from the church of Christ. All members of the congregation are subject in *both doctrine and life* to the *admonition and discipline* of the church" (emphasis added).

If these words are an accurate delineation of Scripture's view on the purposes of church discipline, it is incorrect to limit the scope of church discipline to unethical actions involving personal relationships and/or acts of moral turpitude, as some argue. Biblical church discipline, rather, must also encompass error in doctrine which has the potential to dishonor God or bring offense to the truth within the Body of Christ.

DISCIPLINE IN SCRIPTURE

In examining the meaning, purposes and scope of Christian discipline, it behooves us, of course, to closely examine what God's Word says on the subject. Space does not permit an examination of all of Scripture's references to this subject, but a few brief comments may suffice.

Old Testament

There appears to be a single word in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament specifically denoting discipline. The word is *muwcar* and contemplates a variety of English renderings and connotations: instruction; chasten, chastening, chastisement; correction, discipline, and rebuke or rebuker.

By far most of the Old Testament's rules concerning discipline within the congregation of God are found in the Pentateuch, the books of the law given to ancient Israel. The bulk of these passages provide for one or the other of two actions for specific violations of the law: excommunication (being "cut off" from the congregation) or the penalties of death and retribution.

Perhaps the most instructive and beautiful passages of the Old Testament on the subject of confession and restoration, as part of the discipline of the congregation of the Lord, are the ninth and tenth chapters of the book of Ezra. These chapters, which include the pastoral prayer of confession by Ezra and a covenant of repentance and restitution entered into by penitents among the returning Hebrew exiles, provide a significant model for repentance, confession, self-discipline and judicial procedure when sin is found within the holy nation, the Lord's people. We see the following characteristics, activities and steps taking place:

1. Vigilance by the shepherds of Israel concerning sin
2. A season of earnest penitential prayer, abject humbling and representative confession
3. Courageous public indictment and confession of sin
4. Submission of the matter to ordained authority
5. The taking of oaths, fasting and mourning prior to judicial action
6. Public announcement of public sin and public summons of the guilty to appear to answer the charges, under severe penalty for failure to respond
7. Public call for admission of guilt and repentance
8. Public confession of sin
9. A concerted plan of restitution and effective rectification of the wrong
10. Resultant restoration of the moral integrity of the congregation

New Testament

There are a number of words in the Greek New Testament which denote or connote discipline, in its broad meaning, or which relate to the concept of admonition and instruction in sound doctrine and life. Among them are: *didaskalia*: doctrine(s), learning, instruction; *elegchos*; *elegcho*: reproof; to reprove, convict, convince, tell a fault; *epanorthosis*: correction, reformation, straightening up, rectification; *paideia*, *paideuo*: disciplinary correction, chastisement, chastening; instruction, nurture, thought; to discipline, instruct, punish; *nouthesia*: admonition.

There are scores of texts in the New Testament dealing with one aspect or another of discipline. Again, space does not allow a listing or discussion of each text. However, the large body of New Testament teachings on the subject lead to the following conclusions:

1. Disciplinable offenses include both violations of the divine will (overt transgressions of a moral and ethical nature or delinquency in spiritual obligations) and violations of sound doctrine, teaching and Biblical truth.

2. Vigilant admonition, reproof, rebuke, loving nurture and sound teaching are necessary and crucial as "preventive disciplines." Churches, elders, and individual believers who fail in this duty -- both in its active (promulgation of sound doctrine) and passive (watchfulness and opposition against false doctrine) requirements -- fail in their disciplinary duties as greatly as when they fail to punish more blatant sinners.

3. Truth must be carefully established by strict procedural safeguards in the case of any accusation of wrongdoing. No charge may be entertained by duly constituted church authority without the corroboration of two or three witnesses.

4. Unrepentant offenders, particularly the divisive, are to be excommunicated or disfellowshipped: "cut off," strictly avoided, separated from the healthy remainder of the Body. If the offender is a professing and clearly identifiable "brother or sister," he or she is not to be considered an enemy of the Gospel, and the disfellowship, strict and real though it be, must be applied with the end of repentance and restoration in mind. If the offender is a false prophet, false teacher, heretic or gain-seeking charlatan, he is to be exposed publicly so that the honor of God, integrity of the truth and effectiveness of the true Church may be maintained or restored. If the offender is an avowed enemy of Christ and His Church, he must be confronted and resisted by a disciplined and ready Army of the Lord equipped for spiritual warfare.

5. Discipline in all its aspects is non-optional, that is, it is required by God and Scripture and is given great weight as an ecclesiastical duty. Christian discipline, Biblically applied, reflects God's own attitude toward sin and the sinner: just, holy and full of integrity, yet merciful, spontaneously forgiving, and restorative. Discipline, chastening and the purging of the wicked from the Body of Christ are spiritual benefits for true sons of God, but just retribution for the unrepentant enemies of God.

6. The duty to execute discipline falls upon duly ordained authority in the Church, which holds the "keys to the kingdom" in a very real sense. Nevertheless, this judicial requirement does not relieve other believers of the responsibility to guard and admonish one another in love or bear one another's burdens, including spiritual burdens and temptations. Wide latitude should be given to those weak in the faith when petty, doubtful or legitimately disputable matters are concerned.

AN EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 18

One cannot discuss the subject of Christian discipline without reference to the 18th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, particularly verses 15-17. This is rightly so, since the passage provides Scripture's most detailed, direct instructions on procedures for handling matters of offense involving Christian brethren.

Numerous commentators have suggested that the chapter, Matthew 18, be considered a unit. Others have suggested that it is a collection of isolated situations or teachings, not necessarily related. There does indeed seem to be a logical flow within the chapter, and even if the topics discussed are not a fully integrated whole, there are clearly a number of linkages which help with its interpretation. Perhaps this template might be placed over the chapter:

1. Do not give offense.
2. Seek out those who are offenders, for reproof and potential rectification.
3. When duty toward offenders has been met, stand apart and let God work His cleansing or judgmental powers upon the offender.

The chapter begins by relating the Savior's response to a question put by his disciples. Other Gospels seem to put the question in the context of what has widely been regarded as a somewhat shameful incident in the life of Christ's disciples -- a petty intramural competition for an honored place in the anticipated reign of the Messiah King. Jesus's answer is an object lesson, the thrust of which is humility. In aiming at that lesson, Jesus scores several points along the way: the high regard children are given in the Kingdom; the proposition that humility requires a *conversion* (turn, change, vs. 3) from the usual human orientation of pride; some intriguing information about angels and their duties; the teaching, also found elsewhere in the Gospels, that actions toward dependent persons is tantamount to actions toward Christ; and the profound seriousness of leading another astray.

The first six verses and two later verses where Jesus returns to his object lesson, thus, are, in a number of ways, about offense, including the offenses of pride, ungodly competition, and causing God's true children to sin.

Next, Jesus elaborates on the subject of temptation: both the giving of such and succumbing to the same. This discussion, too, is clearly about offense and includes a stern admonition about self-examination in that respect. *Strictly*

discipline yourself, the Master exhorts, using strong hyperbole, so that you do not fall into temptation or entice anyone else away from the Kingdom. Self-discipline, the necessary prerequisite for any other form of discipline (see *Matthew 7:3-5*), is indeed a vital spiritual necessity.

Jesus then offers a parable on the subject which is to follow: attitude and action toward members of the Kingdom who do go astray, who offend, who follow temptation into a state of lostness. He uses what would have been a familiar picture to His immediate audience -- Jehovah being His people's shepherd. Clearly implied is the idea that this picture is a model for the undershepherds of the Church or for any Christian who has care or responsibility for a fellow believer. Galatians 6 points out that this responsibility of mutual care extends to every Christian. Christian discipline, therefore, requires that each member be watchful of the other -- but not as a predator lurks constantly for a quarry, especially one with a crippling defect, as is the attitude of many Christians over against their fellow members. Quite the opposite. For the shepherd is always on the watch to guard against the predator and at the same time on the watch so that the sheep or lamb does not allow itself to get into a position of danger.

William Hendriksen points out that Jesus, in verse 13, says "if" the wandering sheep is found...the shepherd rejoices. That "if" suggests that those who seek the straying should keep in mind that there may be times when the search and effort to return the lost to the fold may not succeed. "So also not all those who belong to the church visible and for a while were *outwardly* walking in the way of the Lord, but who afterward show that they do not love the Lord, can be reclaimed." (Hendriksen, *5New Testament Commentary -- The Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973 10th ed., 1989, p. 696).

Nevertheless, the focus of the parable of the lost sheep is on the loving and tender care of one who is willing to brave the hazards of the wilderness for the sake of the salvation and/or sanctification of those whose offenses place them in grave danger of spiritual death or injury.

With that picture painted before the eyes of His listeners, Christ turns from parable to practical application. That this application is intended for use within the fellowship of believers seems quite clear from the opening words: "Now if a brother sins...." Matthew Poole (*A Commentary on the Holy Bible, Vol. 3, The New Testament*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1685 [1975], p. 85) here interjects, for contrast, I Corinthians 5:12-13, which asks: "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside" (NIV). Juxtaposing these two passages indeed makes a strong case for considering Matthew 18's procedures to be applicable only in intrachurch matters.

At the same time, the great practical wisdom of these procedures seems to suggest they could serve well in any setting, including the secular, as long as duly ordained authority is available as the final enforcer. This is a significant thought even in the narrower religious realm, in that so many professing Christians today operate in para-church or independent arenas where traditional ecclesiastical structures and offices cannot be easily brought to bear against their offenses. In such cases, great wisdom is required in identifying legitimately ordained authority to apply necessary sanctions against the recalcitrant. (But we are now probably getting ahead of ourselves in deliberation on this text.)

The disciplinary procedures of Matthew 18 seem simple enough:

- * Self-discipline (verses 7-9).
- * Mutual discipline (verses 15-16)
 - * Private face-to-face confrontation
 - * Establishment of truth in contested issues.
- * Church discipline (verses 17-20)
 - * Admonition and adjudication
 - * Excommunication/disfellowship
 - * Continued prayer and evangelization
 - * Restoration and readmission

Having already briefly discussed self-discipline, we turn our attention to mutual discipline as outlined procedurally in verses 15 and 16. "Jesus has been warning against the evil of tempting others to sin. Instead of becoming the cause of someone else's ruin, every follower of the Lord should make it his business to find the sheep that has gone astray and to bring it back to the fold." (Hendriksen, *op.cit.*, p. 697.)

The parable which has just preceded verse 15 sets the parameters for the application that follows. The parable addresses the general matter of going astray. From this we can learn that the mutual-discipline procedures (and church discipline procedures that follow) are intended to cover a broad spectrum of offense -- which we have previously described as encompassing both "doctrine and life." A common

objection to this broad application has been raised on the basis of the words which appear in some translations and in some Greek manuscripts: the phrase "against you." The Authorized Version, based on the *Textus Receptus*, for example, retains the phrase. For many interpreters, this phrase has limited the scope of the disciplinary scheme outlined in these verses, namely that it applies only to interpersonal grievances. As such it is viewed in exactly the same light as the situation St. Paul raises in I Corinthians 6:1-8, the well-known passage dealing with lawsuits among believers. A parallel between the Corinthians passage and Matthew 18 does, indeed, exist, at least to some extent. In both, believers are admonished to "tell it to the church." Beyond that, however, there are few other parallels. In I Corinthians 6, Paul is clearly dealing with interpersonal grievances which, he says, may be resolved in one of two ways: by the mediation of wise men within the Church or by simply accepting wrongs done to us. Reconciliation through wise men is wonderful if it can be achieved, Paul implies, but he adds that it would be better to forego satisfaction than to put spiritual matters into the hands of unspiritual judges, who lack God-given jurisdiction in such things, and risk bringing dishonor upon the name of God in the process. Who is in the right or who is in the wrong seems less important here than protecting the integrity of the Church.

Quite a different scenario with a different end seems to be contemplated in Matthew 18. Here, based on the suggestion of the parable, all manner of offense seems to be contemplated. Furthermore, the passage drives toward a precise resolution and disposition of the sin involved: the binding or loosing of the sinner, depending upon his response to the discipline applied. To be sure, the holiness of the Body of Christ is also at stake here, as in I Corinthians 6. But whereas there the issue is the resolution of disputable matters, the issue here is the purging of sin, over which there ultimately can be no dispute.

As to the disposition of the phrase "against you," we can, it seems reasonable to say, come to the same conclusion about the thrust of the passage whether or not the phrase is retained. Even if one accepts textual sources which do not have the phrase, the ultimate sense of the passage remains the same. If someone sins against me as a member of the Body or if someone sins in any one of a million other ways, a sin has been committed. A sin is an offense against God, in any event, and a sin against God is an offense which impacts the Body of God's Son. The moral integrity of the Church is being penetrated when a member is committing offense against the truth or the moral law of God. The flock is not complete when a sheep strays.

What kind or level of offense does Jesus address here? It is widely accepted that Jesus contemplates what is usually characterized as a "private offense." This is the interpretation given especially by those who hold the view that this passage deals only or primarily with interpersonal grievances. Again, whether the offender has grieved me personally or me in my capacity as a member of Christ is not the crucial issue. What seems clear is that Christ is speaking of any offense which I alone or I, at first, detect. In that sense, the sin referred to is a private one, i.e., it is not one which as yet has become publicly known. (Other Scriptures may be brought to bear on public sins, as we discuss below.) The question being answered here is: when I in my spiritual vigilance and in my spiritual responsibility to be my brother's keeper detect in him some danger or wrong, what should I do about it?

The simple answer is: I must go to him about it, and go alone. I must keep it private at this point. It may be I am wrong in my assessment, and thus it would be an offense on my part to take my perceptions into the public arena prematurely. It may be I am right in my assessment of the brother's life or action or doctrine. By keeping it private, I give the brother an opportunity to see himself and make the necessary change. If he changes (repents), I have "won" a brother, that is, he remains a member in good standing in the Body we share and no one but God is the wiser. What a beautiful and loving thing this is!

The next question is: if after detecting the sin or danger and after having given the straying brother opportunity to get back into the fold, he rejects the opportunity and persists in wandering off into the wilderness, what then must I do?

Again, the answer is quite simple: try again. Only this time be doubly or triply sure you are correct in your assessment of him. Verify your assessment in as small a company of witnesses as you can, again for the sake of damage control within or outside of the flock. The witnesses are not only necessary in establishing the truth concerning the offense but also in establishing the truth about the solution and the standard being used to assess the offense. If I cannot get so much as one or two other wise and spiritual brethren to see the same offense I see, I must question whether I am seeing things correctly. Yet if the two or three of us do agree, our broader vision or collective persuasiveness may bring about the needed conviction that my isolated charge could not. In all this, the process has remained within the realm of *mutual discipline*.

But now, if I through self-discipline remain pure and thus I am better able to discern offense around me, and if I and a few others exercising mutual discipline with an erring brother are not able to win him over, what then must I (we) do?

For a third time, the answer is clear: take the matter somewhere where disposition can be made and enforced. Jesus here calls that place the "Church." This may strike some as curious in light of the fact that He had not yet *formally* established His Church, at least in an organizational or institutional fashion. A discerning reading of the whole Scripture, however, will quickly disclose that Christ's Church, as a spiritual entity, has always existed. In any event, Christ had around Him at the time of the issuance of these instructions His called and ordained Disciples, to whom He frequently gave specific commissions in ministering to the world and to the multitude of His other followers.

Poole considers it "evident" that the term "Church" here means simply the "multitude" (presumably he means the multitude of members of Christ, not the general masses of humanity) and therefore the term "cannot be understood of any particular person." (Poole, *op.cit.*, p. 85). Two other respected commentators have much to say that is more instructive:

MATTHEW HENRY: "*Tell it the church, that particular church, in the communion of which the offender lives; make the matter known to those of that congregation, who are by consent appointed to receive informations of that kind. Tell it to the guides and governors of the church, the minister or ministers, the elders or deacons, or (if such the constitution of the society be) tell it to the representatives or heads of the congregation, or to all the members of it; let them examine the matter, and if they find the complaint frivolous and groundless, let them rebuke the complainant; if they find it just, let them rebuke the offender, and call him to repentance, and this will be likely to put an edge and an efficacy upon the reproof, because given,*" 1. "With greater solemnity," and 2. "With greater authority." It is an awful thing to receive a reproof from a church, from a minister, a reproof by office; and therefore it is the more regarded by such as pay any deference to an institution of Christ and his ambassadors. (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. II, "An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of the Gospel According to St. Matthew," 1710, Wilmington, Delaware: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1972, p. 149).

WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN: "Church" must here be taken in the sense of "the locally organized fellowship of believers." On the basis of the principles which Jesus himself laid down, the New Testament carefully avoids two extremes into which some in later years have fallen. On the one hand the extreme of minimizing the office and authority of apostles and elders is guarded against. See Matt. 10:1,40; Acts 15:6; 20:28a; I Thess. 5:12,13; I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17. On the other hand, the extreme of belittling the high standing, in the eyes of God, of the entire congregation, as if it lacked maturity; as if the body of all believers, whether conceived *locally* (as here in 18:17), denominationally, or universally, had no real "say" in matters of discipline or otherwise; and as if it were the privilege of the ecclesiastical authorities to rule arrogantly, as so many "little tin gods" (see I Peter 5:3 in Phillips' translation; cf. III John 9.)

In the latter connection the following passages merit careful study: besides I Peter 5:3 also Matt. 18:1-4; ... 20:20-28; Acts 15:22 ("Then it pleased the apostles and the elders *together with the whole church...*"); 20:28b. To be sure, the church "authorities" must take the lead. So also here (see verse 18) the apostles -- in later times the elders -- must now be informed about the disciplinary matter which so far has not been resolved. But when the proper time arrives, should they not in turn ask the congregation as a whole to be remembered in prayer, along with all the individuals concerned, so that the Lord may provide wisdom and grace in this important matter? Is it not even possible that the consistory or session can think of someone outside its own immediate group, a very wise, experienced, and saintly member of the church, who might render assistance? Certainly not *all* the wisdom resides in "elders," "sessions," "consistories," "presbyteries," "classes," "special" or "general assemblies" or whatever they may be called. Without in any way shirking their own responsibilities or laying aside their own authority, should not the overseers recognize the *entire* body of believers (here locally organized) in all important matters? Is not this the clear meaning of, "Tell the church"? (*Op.cit.*, p. 701).

These comments, along with and more especially Christ's own appointment in Matthew 18 of the Church's role in discipline, adamantly underscore the absolute necessity of active affiliation of all believers with the Church. Neglect of this

vital component of our religion is rampant today, and this neglect is responsible in large part for the lack of discipline within the Christian community and the chaos which attends the few attempts to exercise discipline. This neglect should clearly be seen by the Church as a major actionable offense in its own right. Articles XXXVII and XXX of the Belgic Confession forcefully underscore, in language which much of today's church would find uncomfortable, that "EVERY ONE IS BOUND TO JOIN HIMSELF TO THE TRUE CHURCH":

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

And that this may be more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

* * *

We believe that this true Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word ... that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means....

Why are membership in a church and a Biblical church polity such crucial issues in the context of our present discussion? Simply because they have everything to do with the issue of *authority*, which Christ next brings into His discussion of discipline: "I solemnly declare to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if on earth two of you agree about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven."

Remove the Church connection from the Christian life, and this solemn declaration of Christ becomes meaningless -- as meaningless as it, in fact, has become in too much of the church of the last decade of the 20th century.

Advocates of ad hoc Christianity are quick to seize upon the lovely and comforting sentiment of verse 20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them." But this verse cannot be divorced from the two preceding it. To be sure, any gathering of believers -- even as few as two -- in close fellowship with Christ and on the basis of His atonement will experience the presence and blessing of God as they pray and worship. But this is merely to underscore the broader implication of the previous verses, that this presence of Christ is the authority by which the Church governs in its task of applying or releasing sanctions on alleged offenders.

In this regard, the picture painted in the vivid vision of St. John in Revelation 1:16-20 is instructive. Here Christ is shown holding seven stars in His powerful right hand of authority. John is told that these seven stars are the "messengers" which God has given to the Church. It seems evident that these "messengers" are the elders, ministers or other authorities God has ordained to carry His prophetic message to the Church and to bring to bear His blessings upon the faithful and His judgments against the unfaithful.

God has an order -- an echelon if you please -- and that order must and will be upheld in any operation that God has established. All authority comes from God, not from man, and *no person in this world has any right or permission to be out from under it at any time* (emphasis added). This is what the Bible calls "patriarchal authority." It operates through the king, the governor, the elders of the Church, the employer, the husband and the father. God is kind, merciful and benevolent. So are wise and godly men, who will give all of the liberty that they can in situations where it is desirable and beneficial. But there is no democracy and no autonomy in the Bible. Jesus Christ is not holding the churches in His right hand; He is holding the *messengers* of the churches in His right hand. It is for the messengers to convey to the Church the Word of God and to see that it is carried out. (Earl Cripe, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, unpublished manuscript, Columbia, California: Jordan Publishing House, 1993, pp. 82-83.)

Jesus assures His Church in Matthew 18:17-20 that its disciplinary decisions, when executed in His name, that is, *according to His true and righteous Word and purposes*, have the full authority of Heaven itself. This is indeed a weighty forewarning for any offender who, up to this point, has resisted admonition. (It is also a warning for any false complainant.)

We back up now to consider the effects of the "binding" sentence which the Church may have to pronounce against the offender if he has still refused its admonitions: "...let him be to you as the foreigner and the tax-collector." How is that? Certainly Jesus was not here endorsing the common attitude of the self-righteous Pharisees toward these outsiders and sinners. He consistently condemned their hatred and despising of such as these. Instead, He most certainly is instructing His Church to emulate His own attitude toward publicans, sinners and the "dogs" outside of Israel. To Him, these were a mission field. They were the sick He came to heal. They were the lost He had come to seek and to save.

To be sure, the sinning brother is no longer a brother. He has forfeited this blessing by his impenitence. He no longer enjoys the fellowship and other privileges of Church membership. He is to be made to *feel this loss keenly*. He is to be "cut off." He is to be delivered unto Satan that he may be taught (painfully, to be sure) not to blaspheme (*1 Timothy 1:20*). But he is not to be despised or hated. He is to be evangelized; he is to be the subject of intercession -- just like any other member of the lost race of humanity. He is to be patiently, oh so patiently, won again for the Kingdom. And if won, he is to be restored to full privilege.

There is a very fine and difficult line to walk here -- the line between disfellowship and entreaty, between ex-communication and the continued communication of Christ's offer of grace and mercy for the sinner. Success in walking this line requires great wisdom and the highest kind of love -- the kind that is patient and kind, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil, is not rude, does not boast or envy, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, that rejoices in the truth, that protects, that trusts, that constantly hopes, that never fails (*1 Corinthians 13:4-8a*).

Jesus so teaches in answering Peter's inquiry in Matthew 18:21. Here love is manifest as forgiveness. Read I Corinthians 13 again, substituting the word "forgiveness" for the word "love," and you will get a sense of Jesus' reply to Peter concerning the scope of forgiveness: seventy times seven, forgive without stopping. Love (forgiveness) never fails.

But does not the Bible link restitution and forgiveness? Certainly, but the former is not a *pre-condition* of the latter, as certain legalists and theologians insist. How do we know this? Jesus taught that human forgiveness was to emulate the Heavenly Father's forgiveness. The Father loves and forgives *on His own initiative*, at a time when the sinner is too dead and bound in sin to make restitution. To be sure, in God's case, restitution (Christ's atoning satisfaction) was made before sins were forgiven -- actually restitution and forgiveness were part of a unified transaction. The situation is slightly different in the case of human forgiveness. We are not, in the same sense, able to atone for another's sins. We can but administer, spontaneously, on our own initiative, the love and forgiveness which Christ has once for all delivered unto the saints. Whether the Father is taking the initiative in His forgiveness or we are taking the initiative in offering His forgiveness to the sinner, it is the same. The restitution requirement is the sinner's *response*, not pre-condition, to the forgiveness freely given in grace.

No better illustration of this can be found than in the parable which Jesus spoke to Peter and the disciples in Matthew 18:23-35: the parable of the unmerciful servant. The parable is a wonderful instruction for both the Church, the freely forgiven forgiver, and to the offender, the debtor who must fall prostrate in helplessness in the face of his offense, great or small, and turn again in gratitude to make what little restitution he can make and re-enter his master's service.

DEALING WITH PUBLIC OFFENSE WITHIN THE CHURCH AND HOW TO DISCIPLINE AN OFFENDING CHURCH

As instructive as Matthew 18 is in considering Christian discipline, it is, of course, not the only major passage on the subject. And while the other passages in no way conflict with the wisdom and practicality of Matthew 18's procedures, they offer additional help in certain situations of offense or error in the Church which may not be thoroughly dealt with in the Matthew 18 discourse.

We have already considered and contrasted with Matthew 18 the admonition of St. Paul in I Corinthians 6. It is our belief that this passage is not, in a strict sense, a teaching on Church *discipline*. The interpersonal grievances to which Paul

refers may or may not involve sin. If sin is involved, the procedures of Matthew 18 are triggered. And even if no sin of moral turpitude is involved, failure to heed Paul's (the Holy Spirit's) wise advice and admonition here is in itself an offense to which the procedures of Matthew 18 must be applied. But primarily, this admonition, as previously stated, has more to do with internal peace and the integrity of the Church in the public eye than with the seeking and restoration of lost or wandering sinners.

We will consider one other major example of Church discipline in the New Testament: St. Paul's account in Galatians 2 of His confrontation with an erring fellow apostle, St. Peter, and some of his followers, in a matter of doctrine and life. We will not take the space or time to rehearse here the historic situation involved, except to note that Peter and a wide number of other Jewish Christians and even the stalwart Barnabas had succumbed, apparently out of fear, to a grievous error which was troubling the Church and damaging the cause of the Gospel.

While we cannot say for certain the Paul did not follow the procedures of Matthew 18 in privately going to each and every one of the offending leaders and Church members and then following up with two or three witnesses in each case, there is no mention of such steps in Paul's account. The clear implication is that Paul did not take these steps, which clearly would have been impractical if not counter-productive in swiftly halting the offenses. And there is likely good grounds for Paul's straight-to-the-church, straight-to-Peter's-face approach in Antioch.

As we noted earlier, the Matthew 18 instructions appear to contemplate the private discovery by one Church member of as-yet-private offense or potential problem in another. Such is clearly not the case in the situation Paul is describing in Galatians 2. In this case, a *first-instance public rebuke was leveled against a very public offense* involving a number, perhaps considerable number, of offenders, Peter being merely the leader of the erring congregation of Judaizing Christians.

John Calvin comments as follows on this passage:

This example instructs us that those who have sinned publicly must be publicly chastised, as far as the church is concerned. the purpose is that their sin may not, by remaining unpunished, form a dangerous example; and elsewhere (I Tim. 5:20) Paul lays down this rule expressly, to be observed in the case of elders, "Those who do wrong you must rebuke in the presence of all, so that also the others may have fear," because the position which they occupy renders their example more pernicious. It was particularly advantageous that the good cause in which all had an interest, should be openly defended in the presence of the people, that Paul might have the better opportunity of showing that he did not shrink from the broad light of day." (Quoted in Hendriksen, *NTC, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979 [1989], p. 96.)

The record of this case seems to suggest that the error had deeply infiltrated an entire church, the Church in Jerusalem of which Peter was a pillar. Paul is in Antioch at the time and a key figure in the church there which had led the worldwide Church in carrying out the newly revealed will of God with regard to the Gentiles and to the ending of the Jewish ritual laws. Essentially, it was a case of one church and its apostolic leadership discovering and confronting a fellow church and its apostolic leadership. The disposition of this case seems to provide a model for Church discipline when offense occurs at such a wide and high level. The solution here depended upon the exercise of *apostolic authority*.

The question naturally follows: where is that authority today? Some insist, of course, that it exists only in the lingering scriptural legacy of the original Apostles, whose office ceased with their death. Others, more correctly, we argue here, hold that it continued in real succession from Christ to the original Apostles to the ordained government of the Church through the ages. How that succession occurs has been the subject of great controversy -- from the Roman view of direct lineage to Protestant views which see a variety of methods of appointment and ordination. The "how" is not our concern here. But the reality of the apostolic function and office is -- its vital importance being underscored in the Galatians 2 account.

In this view, governments of congregations, regional associations, denominations, neighboring independent bodies -- however the Church in a locality, region, nation or the world may be organized or "disorganized" -- have a responsibility one to another for mutual discipline. This responsibility may be exercised through presbyteries, classes, regional ecclesiastical boards, synods, general assemblies, broad Church councils -- again the structural form is not our

concern here, but the reality and existence of some mechanism of this nature seems to be a Biblical requirement. The neglect of the apostolic office is a major cause of disarray in the modern Church.

(ADDENDUM TO PAPER ENTITLED "CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE" BY GARRY J. MOES, SUBMITTED TO THE NORTH AMERICAN PROTESTANT CHURCH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, FEB. 12, 1993. ADDENDUM SUBMITTED FEB. 9, 1995)

MAINTAINING THE PURITY OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

The subject of Christian discipline extends beyond the purity of the individual Christian to the purity of the whole Church. Indeed, the discipline of the individual member, as we have indicated, is in significant part designed to maintain the purity and holiness of the Body of Christ. Since Christ the Head is pure and holy; His Body must necessarily be so. The question then follows: How must a believer respond to an institution which goes by the name of Christ but fails in its duty toward purity of doctrine and life?

Again, the *Belgic Confession* is instructive in stating clearly that there is in this world both a true and a false church.

We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all sects which are in the world assume themselves the name of the Church. But we speak not here of hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church.

This *Confession* goes on to state the marks of the True Church as these:

- { If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein;
- { If it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ;
- { If church discipline is exercised in punishing sin;
- { *In short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. (emphasis added)*

The *Confession* rightly admonishes that "no man has a right to separate himself" from such a Church.

The great document goes on to delineate the marks of the false Church as well. In addition to the obvious; namely, a failure to comply with the above-stated marks of purity, the false church has these characteristics:

- { It ascribes more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word and God, and will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ.
- { Neither does it administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His Word, but adds to and takes from them, as it thinks proper;
- { It relies more upon men than upon Christ;

{ And persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry.

It is fairly transparent from these words that the writers of the *Confession* were addressing the character of the church of their day which most typified these shortcomings, heresies, and oppressive practices: the sixteenth-century Roman Church. Nevertheless, this outline remains a sound fundamental statement of the primary marks of the false church of all ages; and as no true believer¹ may rightly before Christ separate himself from the True Church, he may *not rightly join himself to the false*.

"These two Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other." The True Church gives absolute primacy in all things to the Word of God, which it holds to be perfect, authoritative, and binding in every respect which it claims for itself. The false church relegates the Word—and the authoritative preaching and application thereof—to a secondary, irrelevant, or immaterial place in its life. The True Church finds the divinely revealed Word of Truth to be the holy ordinance of Christ governing both doctrine and life. The false church "will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ." The True Church faithfully avails itself of the Means of Grace instituted by Christ to lead His Body into constant remembrance of His salvation and into a proper nurturing of faith in that Holy Work. The false church relies solely or primarily upon the sentiments of the human heart and the longings of the spiritual quest in a vain hope of discovering the secrets of life. The True Church glories in truth, righteousness, justice, and holiness. The false church glories in religious questioning, toleration, egalitarianism, multiculturalism, pluralism, aesthetics and style, cultural tradition or repudiation thereof, mysticism, a relativistic ethic, and an anthropocentric, foundationless morality. The emptiness of the false church is well depicted, for example, in the following credo of a certain metropolitan church in Northern California, which recently described itself in the following advertisement:

MYTH: Christianity Means Subscribing To Narrow-Minded Doctrine.

At [NAME OF CHURCH], we believe that Christian faith is not about knowing answers but about asking questions. [NAME] Church imposes no doctrinal or sexual orientation litmus tests on members. Rather, what we expect of ourselves and each other is the willingness to explore what it means to say, "God loves me and you. I love me and you and God."

As a diverse and cross-generational congregation, we ask these questions within the realities of our own lives—the joys and difficulties of relationships with families, lovers, and spouses; and our concerns about AIDS, economics, personal growth, aging, bigotry, and fear. We believe that each person is responsible for their [*sic*] own relationship with the divine. We offer companionship on the journey, not pat solutions. But we make the journey together, rather than alone, because we have much to learn from each other. We believe that wrestling with spiritual questions is the primary way to know what it means to live and to love. We come to church because we are hungry for transcendence in our lives. We come because we love good music. We come to be moved by silence and word. We come to give our children an ethical and religious education, and to take responsibility for the transmission of values.

What we are building here is one of the most radical and significant works of a lifetime. The forces of violence, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and family disintegration are best countered and healed by faith communities such as ours at {NAME} Church. We are helping one another get through the world, and we are helping the world become a better place. What's more radical than that?

It is disgraceful that such an institution should call itself by the name of Christ. But beyond the blasphemy of such a claim are the tragedies of its hollow offer to merely "journey" with the spiritually hungry and its empty promise that no satisfaction will be found for all of man's "wrestling." No member of Christ, no true Temple of the Spirit, can possibly be a member of such a faithless community. The false church may be "radical" and a "significant work" of human concoction. The True Church—the New Testament's *ekklesia*—is a Divine Creation of unsurpassed

¹We define this term thusly: "With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him." (*Belgic Confession*, Article XXIX)

worth, genuine transcendence, and living substance. It is (to state *ekklesia* definitionally) a community of members on earth and saints in heaven who have been called out and gathered unto the Lord to be His People and the repository of all that He offers in His Law and Gospel. To be sure, as the call of Christ is first extended to them, they "are naturally one with the rest of fallen humanity; guilty and therefore under condemnation and corrupt in heart, even spiritually dead in trespasses and sins," in the words of expositor M.J. Bosma.

In gathering them to himself our Savior renews his people in heart and life, turns them from a life misspent in sin to the service of God. But the Savior not only brings them to himself, and through himself to God, he also brings them together, to form together under him one body, one people. Satan tries to destroy all unity. He has succeeded in dividing the human race through sin. Humanity is torn apart, its unity is broken. Did not God's common grace prevent it, humanity would present the spectacle of hell, where discord and antagonism runs riot. Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan, to restore unity and harmony. All share in his favors in a measure through the blessing of society, but in and through his people, gathered and renewed through the Holy Spirit, Jesus restores true unity and harmony. He forms them to be together one body, the Church....

By using this word **ecclesia** the Bible lays stress on the fact that the Church is not a human institution, a society formed by the will of man, but of divine origin. The Church is a gathering called out of the rest of humanity....God must make us members by calling us into living union with Jesus Christ.²

This living union with the holy and pure Christ, Whose Word is norm and law and life, verily necessitates that His members must likewise maintain holiness and purity. It means further that any yoking with that which is anti-Christ, that which violates the unswerving perfection of His normative Word, is a defilement of His Person and His Body, an act which He will not and cannot abide. A true member's intercourse with the harlot, furthermore, is his own defilement, a scourge which he should seek to avoid like a plague.

The recognition of the Word of God as the *will* of God for His people is the primary distinctive of the True Church and is what separates it from every false religious institution. Francis Schaeffer has called this issue the "watershed." There is a "line drawn between those who take a full view of Scripture and those who do not," he has said.

But remember that we are not just talking about an abstract theological doctrine. It makes little difference in the end if Scripture is compromised by theological infiltration or by infiltration from the surrounding culture. It is the *obeying* of Scripture which is the watershed—obeying the Bible equally in *doctrine* and in the way we live in the full spectrum of life.³

Whenever a Church begins to lose its commitment and obedience to that Word and begins to place human thought, emotion, practice, or relationships above the plain teaching of the Scriptures, that Church soon loses its purity and power.

The word of God has been intrusted to the Church, and the mission of the Church is to spread the knowledge of this word throughout the world. By thus spreading the truth of God's revelation the [visible] Church becomes the mother of believers, through her the [invisible] Church is perpetuated; if any Church fails to declare the word of God, she fails in her mission and becomes barren, no more children of God are born in her midst....God does not own such circles as his Church and does not bless them as such.⁴

²M.J. Bosma, *Exposition of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Smitter Book Company, Publishers, 1927), pp. 232-233.

³Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books) 1984, p. 64.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 237-238, parenthetical material not in original. Bosma adds this important caveat: "Not every deviation from the truth on a minor point will, however, cause a Church to lose the mark of the true Church. There are degrees of loyalty to the word and purity of teaching. A Church might be true to the word in the great essentials of salvation, while in some points there might be a mistaken conception of the truth and erroneous practices in consequence, but since the main truths of the Bible were believed and confessed, we would still look upon such a denomination as part of the Church of Christ. It might even be that there were a great number of very sincere Christians in such a Church, even more than in another Church wherein there was a better conception of the truth, but wherein a dead orthodoxy instead of a living faith was emphasized. We can not estimate the purity of the Church, however, according to the number and activity of its members, but must judge a Church according to its confession. And usually where we find love of the word of God and acceptance of all its teachings, we will find the purest and strongest manifestation of the Church of Christ." (p. 238) Note also I Corinthians 4:1-7 concerning the fact that the Word of God has been entrusted to the Church.

The Visible and Invisible Church

It is vital, in this context, to fully understand the nature of the True Church, namely, that it is a spiritual and mystical body that is in its foremost reality "Invisible." That is to say, man cannot see who are truly members of the Spiritual Church.

The spiritual life of the Holy Spirit makes us true members of the eternal Church of Christ. But this life is hidden from view. The Church will once be visible in heaven,⁵ for the present the hidden relation and life of the true Church members is hidden.

But the Church also has a Visible manifestation. The perfected Church of Heaven's realms has sometimes been called the **Church Triumphant**, its earthbound counterpart the **Church Militant**, i.e., the Church which still struggles for the eternal Kingdom in its earthly realm. It is in this earthly realm that the calling out of the *ekklesia* is initially made manifest, though its reality and design are from before the foundation of the world. When God calls an individual into His Invisible Kingdom, He instills within him a sense of longing which draws him naturally to others who have been similarly called. For it is in them that he finds his temporal strength and his portal to the things of heaven. As these called-out-ones come in contact with one another, and they will (for the Spirit draws them), they discover they have "common needs and aims" and therefore join themselves together institutionally as they have already been joined organically. Thus is born the Visible Church.

The invisible Church precedes, and the Church visible follows as a necessary result of the Church invisible expressing itself. Where there is no Church invisible, that is, where there are no true believers in Christ, no visible Church can originate....The distinction between Church visible and invisible is not that between two different Churches, but...between two sides of one and the same Church.⁶

That is not to say that the Church Visible and the Church Invisible are the exact equivalents of each other. And that is where the problem comes in. It is quite probable that there are many associated with the Church Visible—many clever or self-deceived pretenders and hypocrites—who are not members of Christ and are therefore not members of the Church Invisible. They are the tares among the wheat. It is also possible, in exceptional circumstances, that a member of the Church Invisible may live on earth without the opportunity to associate himself with the Visible Church—due to physical inability, geographical isolation, or the absence of a faithful element in his reasonable proximity, for example. Yet, "where two or three are gathered in His name," there is Christ among them. The essential point of this discussion is that the Church Visible/Militant is called upon by its Lord **to bring itself as much as is possible on earth into conformity with the character of the Church Invisible**, that perfect, holy, and purified Body which is justified and sanctified in Christ. The tools (the Means of Grace) which the Head has given His body to accomplish this task are the Spirit, the Word, the sacraments, and the institutions of Christian discipline, which include the ordained government of the Church and the correctional procedures outlined earlier in this paper. This is why it is essential that the Word be purely preached and taught, that the holy ordinances and services of the church be administered faithfully for the ends to which they were given, and that the government and discipline of the church be maintained as ordained by Christ. Where a congregation, denomination, or other institutional manifestation of the Church Visible is unfaithful to these marks of the True Church, or where blasphemers of the false church usurp the name of Christ, the true member of Christ must disassociate himself.

With tears we must say...that a large segment of the evangelical world has become seduced by the world spirit of this present age. And more than this, we can expect the future to be a further disaster if the evangelical world does not take a stand for biblical truth and morality in the full spectrum of life. *For the evangelical accommodation to the world of our age represents the removal of the last barrier*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

*against the breakdown of our culture....To accommodate to the world spirit about us is the most gross form of worldliness in the proper definition of the word.*⁷

The standard of judgment on such matters, of course, is the Word of God itself. It is to this Word that the individual true believer and the apostolic authority of the Church must look for guidance in exercising their duty to achieve and maintain purity in doctrine and life. They do the wavering Visible Church no honor who fail to bring it under godly admonition. They place themselves in grave spiritual danger who, for the sake of tradition, expedience, status, convenience, or other false motives, refuse to separate themselves from the false church or to bring that "church" under righteous judgment.†

⁷Schaeffer, *op.cit.*, pp. 141-142. Italics in original.